

## CLAUSTROPHOBIA<sup>1</sup>

*Abbie Carter Goodloe*

The church rehearsal was over, and Warner, leaning against the side of the chaneel, told himself in a sudden panic that never, under any circumstances, could he go through with the real ceremony.

It had been a full-dress rehearsal—for all but the bride, of course—and his ears were still filled with the crashing reverberations of the wedding march, his eyes still dazzled by dissolving views of the eight Watteau bridesmaids in rainbow-hued chiffon frocks, advancing slowly up the aisle, swaying this way and that, leaning affectedly on tall, ribbon-decked sticks. They had broken ranks now and were moving about, chatting animatedly with the groomsmen, their conversation much interfered with by the diminutive flower girl and velvet-clad ring bearer, riotously at large now that their onerous duties were performed.

Over this scene of expensive and brilliant disorder the bride presided competently and coolly. Warner, watching Rémy as she moved from one group to another, now talking over some point of the music programme with the organist, now turning to speak with the florist who had dropped in for last suggestions, now catching the fleeing flower girl and ring bearer to coach them once more in their "parts," realized finally and fully that just so would she go through life—ordering its forces according to her will, imposing her wishes on all around her. The fear that had been tugging at his heart and brain for weeks seemed suddenly to clutch him, physically, by the throat and choke him. . . . The wedding

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party went back to Rémy's for sandwiches and claret cup, and when it broke up, Warner left with the rest. Three blocks up the avenue he stopped his taxi, got out, paid the chauffeur, and walked quickly back to the big white stone house he had just left. He stood looking up at it for a moment, and then, spurred by the fear that Rémy might demur at seeing him so late, he ran up the steps and pressed the electric button.

Briggs, the Cosgroves' butler, loath to believe that anything more could happen in a day already packed with hectic events, waited an instant, doubtful that the bell, which had rung so often, could possibly have rung again at that hour of the night. A second reverberation dashed his hopes, and as he moved majestically to the door, he told himself bitterly that the eve of a wedding is a trying time in any household, and that he regretted sincerely having let himself in for such a fatiguing occasion in the Cosgrove ménage. But at sight of Warner his bitterness dissolved, and he welcomed the morrow's bridegroom to the warmth of the library with a knowing and forgiving smile. He too had known a wedding eve! Men, high and low, were pretty much alike, he reflected. Aloud he assured the young man that he would send a maid to Miss Rémy with the message at once. He put another log on the fire, and as he disappeared through the door on his errand, he favoured Warner with another brotherhood-of-man glance.

Warner resented the look and its sentimental implications with a fervour that astonished himself. He stood by the mantel, his clenched hands thrust deep into his pockets, scowling at Briggs's retreating back. Well, he wouldn't have to see him or his meaning glances again, he told himself with a sudden guilty relief. No—he would never see Briggs again. As for that matter, he would never see Rémy again—or this room where so much had happened to him. He looked around it with a curious new interest, as though for the first time. In a certain sense it was the first time, for he had never before been able to look at it with detachment. Rémy had always been there with him, and Rémy had always demanded his entire attention. There was something rather suffocating about

the demands Rémy made upon one. She was certainly not the sort to give him time for all this—the Franz Hals high above the carved mantel, the Rodin near the window, the long rows of dignified, handsomely bound books, stretched along the walls, which looked as though no one ever handled or loved them.

As he glanced at them now, he grinned with sardonic amusement. What was he doing *dans cette galère magnifique*, anyway, he asked himself. The doctors assure us that we change completely every seven years. Well, he had changed completely in seven weeks. He had come into that charming room a certain sort of man seven weeks before, and he was leaving it for the last time, to-night, a totally different person. It was all over—or would be, in a few minutes. Rémy would never forgive him, naturally. He straightened up against the mantel and raised his head as he heard her foot on the stairway.

She came in quickly and laid a hand on Warner's shoulder, putting up her provocative lips, on which hovered a subtle feminine replica of Briggs's intimate smile. But Warner only looked at her strangely and made no movement to take her into his arms.

"What's the matter?" she demanded. "Are you still angry?"

He shook his head.

"Then what is it?" She spoke with a scarcely concealed impatient astonishment.

"Can't you guess?"

"Heavens, no!" she said, and glanced at the clock. "It's almost twelve o'clock. Phil—don't ask me to engage in a guessing contest at this hour of the night! Just let me have it straight, can't you, old dear?"

In the beginning Warner had sometimes thought Rémy too direct, too brutally forthright in her manner. It was a note in her youthful ultra-modernism which he hadn't particularly liked. But now he welcomed her straightforward technique. The interview couldn't be too short, too much to the point for him.

"I want to tell you something I should have told you weeks

ago, Rémy, and to give you back something I should never have asked you for."

The girl's intent gaze held a look of surprise, followed by one of fear. She moved slightly away from Warner.

"I don't think I understand." Her straight, dark brows that contrasted so beautifully with her yellow hair drew together in a puzzled frown. The curved, somewhat full lips flattened out into a thin red line. "I don't understand," she said again.

Warner filled his lungs with air as for a dive. Then he took the plunge.

"It's simply this, Rémy!—I've known for weeks that we weren't suited to each other—oh, don't shake your head! You've found it as hard to put up with me as—well— The truth is, my dear girl, we've made a bad bargain, and now, at the eleventh hour, I've found the courage to come here and own up to it and set you free. I'm not the man for you, and I ought never to have asked you to marry me."

For a moment the girl did not speak. She moved a chair closer with her knee, sank down on it, and looked up at Warner. She touched her bobbed hair with a little gesture which he had once thought charming, but which for some time had vaguely annoyed him, and smiled. He noticed with a shock how sharp and pointed were the small eye-teeth as her lip drew back over them.

"Is this a joke, Phil?"

"No—oh, no!" he said earnestly.

"It's in extremely bad taste, you know," she swept on, ignoring his protest.

"'Bad taste'!—there you are, Rémy." He gave a little laugh. "I've come to realize that I, myself, and everything I do and say is labelled 'bad taste' by you. Isn't that enough of itself to prove what I say—that we aren't suited to each other?"

"Don't be absurd, Phil! People don't break engagements for a superficial reason like that. Besides, I dare say you'll learn—I've always known you were clever. You'll find out quickly enough what's done and what isn't, once you are really one of us."

"That's just it, Rémy. I find that I don't really want to be one of you. The New York type doesn't impress me as being the perfect thing, by any means. I'm afraid of becoming a rubber stamp."

She smiled at him with disarming candour.

"Don't worry, old dear! You'll never become the perfect New Yorker! You'll be my 'young Lochinvar' to the end. And frankly, I hope you always will be wild-western and cavemannish—it was what first attracted me to you, you know," she added.

"I've always wondered."

Rémy got up and stood leaning against the mantel, facing Warner. She looked at the tall, slim young man before her with an appraising glance that missed nothing, neither his good nor his bad points. His keen face and slender, athletic figure, though undeniably good, were somehow unfashionable. He was handsome, compelling in an unstandardized way—sharply different from the men she had always known. At times she felt like a pith-ball between two opposing electric poles—now attracted, now repelled. On the whole, she had been far more attracted than repelled. She felt strongly attracted now.

"Yes, I like it—to a certain extent," she said finally, and smiled.

"When it doesn't interfere with your plans." Warner grinned sardonically.

"If you mean the wedding ceremony and giving up that ranch of yours on the edge of nowhere for New York and Father's office—yes. You really have been rather absurd about the wedding, old dear. I've worked hard over the whole thing. It will make a beautiful picture, and I certainly feel that I have the right to arrange my wedding according to my ideas—especially as *you* didn't seem to have any on the subject."

"Oh, yes—I had some. I'd thought about it—out there, under the stars—just a few friends—in some dim, quiet church—"

Rémy laughed a tinkling, amused laugh and sank down again on her chair.

"It's unfortunate that our ideas on the subject didn't happen to coincide, Phil!"

"Well, I wasn't thinking particularly of the wedding. I was thinking—haven't you noticed that our ideas never coincide, Rémy?" demanded Warner.

"They coincided the night you asked me to marry you and I consented," said the girl quickly.

Warner shifted his stance a little and looked down at the upleaping flame before speaking.

"Yes—but if you will be as honest with me as I am with you, Rémy, you'll acknowledge that, for once, you made a bad mistake."

"I acknowledge no such thing," retorted the girl.

"Don't you think it a bad mistake to marry a man whose whole attitude toward life and mode of living are so different from your own?"

She made an amused little *moue*.

"Not if he will promise to change them—as you have!"

"That's just the point," said Warner slowly. "I find I can't keep that promise."

"Ah, *that* is serious. A man who won't keep his promises—!" Her voice had an icy edge to it.

"It isn't that I won't—it's that I can't, Rémy!"

"Just what do you mean by that?" she asked after an instant's pause. Warner leaned restlessly against the mantelpiece, then moved away from it uncertainly and sank into a chair near Rémy's.

"See here," he said, "let's talk this over sensibly and quietly."

"What do you want to talk over sensibly and quietly?" demanded the girl.

"Why—the mistake we are thinking of making and how to avoid it." Warner leaned forward and spoke earnestly. "If—if you had engaged passage on a boat sailing for Europe and had suddenly discovered that she was unseaworthy, wouldn't you cancel your passage, Rémy? I've come to the conclusion that our boat will go down in the first blow, and I think the only sane thing to do is—to cancel our passage."

"You can't cancel a passage when it's time to haul in the gangplank! It's too late—no steamship company would stand for it, Phil. And, besides, if one has any sporting blood, one would rather take the trip, with the chance of drowning, than to be left behind, disappointed."

Warner smiled a little. "I don't believe you'd be very disappointed, Rémy, and you wouldn't be left behind for long. You'd simply take the next boat with someone else—there are plenty for you to pick and choose from! It isn't as though you loved me."

The girl threw up her bright head, frowning.

"Oh, I dare say I'd make another sailing date. But—I do love you, Phil. You're different. I was so tired of all the men I'd known. They are all so alike——"

"That's it—that's what I've come to realize—that I was just something new for you to play with, Rémy. You'd better have left me out there in the West, where you found me. It was the life I'd always known, and now I realize that it's the only life I can lead."

"You should have thought of that sooner," said the girl coldly.

"Perhaps—only I'm sure you'll acknowledge that before I came East I didn't know what I was up against. It was practically impossible for me to realize your background."

"And now—on our wedding day"—she glanced again at the clock—"you've decided that you dislike that background so much that you want it—and me—to fade out of the picture of your life. Is that it?"

"Yes," said Warner steadily.

"Impossible, old dear!"

"Why 'impossible'? If you loved me—that would be different," he said again.

She shook her bobbed head in an exasperated fashion.

"I tell you I do love you, Phil—in my way. Oh, of course, I'm not sentimental—it isn't done nowadays—and if you throw me over I shan't go to the bottom, like the 'wild duck,' because I have a couple of slugs in me and a trailing wing! I'll come to the surface all right and I'll keep afloat. But I acknowledge I shan't feel happy. You've come to mean a lot

to me, Phil. You may not be perfect, but you can put it all over the men I've known——”

She stared brightly at him while her mind raced backward to the preceding summer, when she had suddenly found the men of her set intolerable. Josh Carlisle had taught her what to expect in the way of ultimate disillusionment, and it was in a revolt against him and his kind that she had acquiesced in her father's invitation to accompany him on a trip to inspect some mining properties in Idaho. The inspection over, they had decided on a short riding tour, and it was at the end of a hard day's going in the Snake River country that they had come upon the “Bye-low Ranch.”

As Rémy stared at Warner she could see again the hot, treeless upland trail, from which they had unexpectedly looked down into the valley, with Warner's ranch lying cool and shady at the bottom. It had seemed like a glimpse of Paradise with its copper-splashed pool, gleaming blue as a Maxfield Parrish bit of water between the dark, pointed poplars growing beside it; and the white ranch house, surrounded by unbelievably green grass and fat, grazing cattle, seemed to extend a welcome to them. They turned their horses' heads downward, and at sunset drew rein at the wide porch steps of the “Bye-low Ranch,” and Rémy saw Warner for the first time. . . .

From the very beginning he had attracted her. His thin, tanned face, his supple, hard body, slim-waisted, narrow-flanked, so different from the well-fed, well-set-up New Yorkers she had known, exercised a curious fascination over her. An impersonal note in his attentions, a politeness untinged with gallantry, piqued her. As for Warner, the unexpected advent of the girl, her youth and seductiveness, the aura of wealth and power about her, dazzled him, who had never before been dazzled by such things. It was as though he had plucked a star from the blue. . . . Together they rode over the ranch, and he showed the girl the waving fields of alfalfa, explaining the wonders of the irrigating system and unfolding all the plans so dear to him for further development of the natural resources of the country. When the day grew too hot for riding, they loafed in the big, cool living

room, looking at his guns and hunting trophies and discussing the books and magazines that crowded the tables and spilled over on to the floor. In the evenings they sat out under the bright stars, the shadow of the Sawtooth Mountains looming faintly in the distance, and Warner told her the uneventful story of his life. . . .

He had been brought West when a baby, by his father, seeking health after a bad nervous breakdown in a bank, and had grown up in the large tranquillity of that new country, alone, save for his parents, his dogs and horses and the occasional bands of migrating Indians. His father had managed to make a little money, and there had been a tutor for the boy during a couple of winters, and then three years at Leland Stanford. He had been recalled from college by the death of his father, followed by that of his mother in a few months. Since then he had lived alone, busy, contented. . . .

Rémy and her father stayed two weeks, and long before the impromptu visit was up she knew that she wanted Warner more than she had ever wanted anything in her life. She felt sure that she had only to stretch out her hand, and she knew no reason for staying it. Hadn't she always got what she wanted?

And now this prize, which had seemed so easily within her grasp, was slipping from her, eluding her! There had been times since Warner's arrival in New York, Rémy acknowledged to herself, when she had doubted the wisdom of her choice—moments when Warner had seemed the square peg in the round hole—but with the possibility of losing him his desirability redoubled. All her predatory instincts awoke and warred with her pride. She looked at Warner with eyes cold as steel.

"And so you want me to put an end to things between us—here—to-night—?"

"It's best for you as for me—"

"Oh, never mind about me!" She tossed the words at him defiantly. "The point is you want me to give you up. Haven't you any intelligible explanation of your request, at least, to offer me?"

Warner looked at her perplexedly.

"Yes," he said at length, slowly. "To begin with, we're both different—here. I don't recognize myself here and I don't recognize you. You aren't the same girl——"

"I've changed less than you," she interrupted, "since my feelings have not changed as yours have. *I care just the same——*"

"Yes, but no longer for *me*. You care for a man of your own creating—a man who will give up the life that was the breath of him, who will chain himself to a mahogany desk in a plutoeratic office and gamble for money, a man who——" He broke off and turned to her with a despairing gesture. "See here, Rémy—I'm an untamed creature. All my days I've lived out in the open. If you loved me enough to live my life——"

She stopped him with a gesture.

"I'm quite willing to go out to Idaho in the summers and spend a few weeks at your ranch—it's a smart enough thing to do now—spend a while at a 'dude ranch'——" Warner winced—"but as for living there——! You can't seriously think I'd want to *live* there?"

"Oh, no. I'm convinced you wouldn't." Warner's vibrant voice had gone flat. "I'm as convinced of it as that it is the only existence for me. I've honestly tried to change—I've meant to do all you ask and expect of me, but I suddenly knew to-night that I couldn't. I've got to have freedom. Marriage isn't freedom—it's the other thing." He stopped and looked at the girl meditatively. "If there is a sane explanation of what I'm doing to-night it's that, I suppose—the horror of putting myself in a situation from which there is no escape. And feeling as I do, I decided that the only honest thing to do was to tell you all this before it was—too late."

"You call this belated refusal to fulfil your promises 'honest'?"

"Yes. Perhaps if ours could have been a real marriage, if you had been willing to follow me, to have walked out there in that spacious tranquillity, hand in hand with me, under the quiet stars—then love might have had the illusion of

liberty. But here!—in this cramped life, hedged about by a thousand damnable conventions—good God! I've got the suffocating feeling that I've walked into a trap, a cave, an endless tunnel! I know you despise me—I despise myself. But I can no more control this feeling than I can control the colour of my eyes. It's a physical terror I feel, mind you—as though I were helpless, shut in, bound—can't you understand, Rémy?'"

"I understand that you are a coward and a welcher. I understand you once wanted me and that now all you want is to leave me flat—to humiliate me before my world—to be free of me—to get away! That's it, isn't it?" demanded the girl passionately.

"That's the way it looks to you, I suppose," said Warner slowly. "And it is true that I want to be free again—to be rid of this unconquerable fear that grips me."

The girl turned pale beneath the rouge on her round young cheeks. She rose with unaccustomed dignity.

"I would never dream of holding a man who wanted to leave me," she said in a tone Warner had never heard her use. She glanced at the clock and struck her hands sharply together. "But—but what can we do? It's too late to get a notice into the papers—the usual 'the engagement has been broken by mutual consent'!" She smiled bitterly.

"I'll do anything under God's heaven you say—anything to make this easier for you."

"It is only fair that you should bear the brunt of it," said the girl coldly.

"Why not tell everybody that I am 'a coward and a welcher,' as you put it? That will set you straight and serve me right."

The girl moved slowly away and stood by the table, drumming lightly on it with her fingertips. She gave a short laugh.

"It's just like you, Phil, to suggest that! It would be the very last thing I'd do. Inform an amused world that I've been thrown down, abandoned by my 'young Lochinvar'?—thank you!"

"I see. I was only anxious that no blame should attach to you. But, of course, I see now it wouldn't do."

"Of course not. In a case like this, it is better for the woman to be wrong than right. If there is any throwing down to be done, I must do it—you owe me that much at least."

"I owe you everything."

"Everything, except——" There was the hint of a break in Rémy's voice, but she pulled herself sharply together. It wasn't her way to show emotion. She stared down thoughtfully at the table, still drumming lightly on it with her polished fingertips. Suddenly she looked up at Warner, and there was a curious, bright light in her eyes.

"I've thought of a way—but it will be hard on you, I admit."

"I've told you I'd do anything under heaven you want done. Punish me as you see fit—I deserve to be punished."

"It will be punishment all right," said the girl quietly. "It's just this—it's too late to tell everybody, so we'll say nothing and let them come to the church. You must be there with your best man, but I—I shall not come! It will be the worst quarter of an hour of your life, but you've simply got to stand for it."

"I see."

"After all, these people are not your friends—they're mine—and they'll forgive me and forget you and your humiliation quickly enough. And it's the only way I can think of to clear myself—to make them believe absolutely that it was I who tired of the engagement——" Her voice broke definitely this time. "You'll just have to stand for it, Phil," she said again.

"You couldn't think of anything I wouldn't stand for, Rémy. All I ask of you is that some day you'll write and tell me that you forgive me and understand," said Warner gravely. He got to his feet. "Until four o'clock, then."

The afternoon throngs on the Avenue were being treated to their favourite free "show"—a fashionable church wedding. White-gloved policemen waved up the gleaming limousines in unending line and dispatched them after the lordly fashion of well-subsidized policemen at a wedding. The halting, curious crowd pressed close about the awning, beneath which

richly dressed women and men in frock coats and high silk hats passed into the Church of the Heavenly Angels. Through the opening portals the perfume of flowers and the crash of organ music were wafted to the afternoon air. Inside the church the wedding guests rustled and craned their necks and whispered about the bride. Rémy Cosgrove had been one of the most conspicuous of the younger set. She had personality. Everything she did attracted attention. Her selection of a young, unknown Westerner had piqued Society, and Society, thirsting to have its curiosity satisfied, was out in force.

Warner, who had come early, waited in the vestry room with his best man, Amos Whitridge—a young fellow he had never laid his eyes on until a few weeks before. The slenderness of his acquaintanceship with his “best man” typified clearly enough the curiously haphazard character of the whole situation as far as he was concerned. He hadn’t a real friend or relation in that part of the United States. All those people out there, foregathered from vulgar curiosity, expecting to see him go through with the most sacred ceremony of his life, were Rémy’s friends—just strangers to him. It was damnable! There was one consolation, though. As Rémy had said, the humiliation she was about to put upon him would be more bearable under those circumstances. All he really wanted in the world, he told himself, was that it should be over! He glanced at his watch surreptitiously. A few minutes more and he would be free!

He slipped his watch back and touched lightly and jubilantly a small, flat envelope in the pocket of his waistcoat. It was his ticket back to the “Bye-low Ranch.” He had dashed out in a taxi early in the morning to the railroad office and bought it. Freedom and contentment were in that little envelope. He sighed happily. This bad quarter of an hour would soon be over and done with forever. Good God! just to get away from all this and back to the waving green of the alfalfa fields and the sunsets behind the jagged mountain range—!

Whitridge opened the chancel door a crack and peeped out.  
“Gad! I never saw such a crowd!”

The rector of the Heavenly Angels came into the vestry,

shook hands with Warner impressively, and put on his canonicals. Then he consulted his watch.

"Don't get nervous, young man! It's five minutes after four, but the bride is always late!" He smiled jocularly at Warner, and turned to Whitridge. "I am going into the chancel—I always say a prayer before performing the marriage ceremony. You and Mr. Warner had better come, too, as the bridal party will surely be here any moment now," he said, and, followed by the two young men, passed into the chancel.

From their station behind the barrage of palms, Warner could see the shifting, myriad-hued assemblage perfectly. Above the swelling arpeggios from the organ loft there hummed the murmured talk of the restless throng. The heavy perfume of flowers hung on the agitated air. Warner felt a queer constriction in his throat, a tightening about his pounding heart. Somewhere in his neck a strange new pulse was throbbing furiously. God! if only it were over!—if only the ordeal were over and he could slip away!

He put his hand in his pocket and touched again his passport to liberty. After all, it wouldn't be long now—he was only getting what was coming to him. He'd stand it! Freedom was only a little way ahead! He passed a handkerchief across his damp forehead.

Suddenly the organ stopped with a crash. There was a deep silence, broken only by the soft, concerted movement of craning necks. And then the first soft strains of the Mendelssohn "Wedding March" fell upon Warner's startled ears. Young Whitridge turned to him and grinned encouragingly.

"Come on!" he whispered.

Warner shook his head. "Wait a minute!—there's some mistake——" His dry lips had difficulty in forming the words. Whitridge stared at him curiously.

"What's the matter with you?" he demanded. "Buck up! Hurry!—they've started!"

Dazed, Warner faced about, and with Whitridge's compelling hand on his arm, found himself walking to the front of the chancel. He looked down the aisle with troubled eyes, and there, in the dim, flower-strewn distance, he saw advancing

in slow, ineluctable procession, the eight Watteau bridesmaids, the diminutive flower girl and velvet-clad ring bearer, and behind them Rémy, in white satin and rose point, leaning on the arm of her father. . . .